

# INTERLUDE

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## THE ART OF CREATIVITY

### Some Personal Reflections

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What is creativity? And how do we promote it through the arts?

At the outset let me confess that my own addiction to making art – writing poetry – began partly as a reaction to the stifling dullness of my own education. I think I can truthfully claim that, with the exception of one small picture of the North Sea crayoned when I was at Primary School, I did not create a single piece of expressive work throughout my entire schooling. No music, no drama, no dance, no film, no photography, no creative writing. An utter negation.

And as I was born into a rural working-class family there were no artistic invitations from the community either. Life was a practical business; one simply got on with it.

My father was a coach driver; my mother worked in a local shop. We struggled to make ends meet and were expected to conform to the expectations of a small provincial community. But a large part of me was not practical in this way and by mid-adolescence, I longed for something more; something that, then, I could hardly have put into words. What was it? It was an inchoate desire to encounter works of art which expressed more than calculation and convention, that caught the mystery of being alive in an incomprehensible world, that hinted at its submerged possibilities, and that held up images of beauty and truth, alienation and loss.

Pondering the drabness of my education I wrote recently the following poem:

#### **Learning How Not To Live**

What did I learn at school but the grammar of schism,  
Tireless division of subject

And object, questions shut tight as an evangelist's fist,  
The red catechism,

Clause analysis, problems with one correct answer  
At the back of the book.

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We put phrases in coffins and buried them neatly.  
Where were the words

Which turned into kestrels on the wind's edge?  
Where were the verbs

That flowered, dark cones of lilac at the window ledge  
Or petalled the grass

Or scattered sharp hail against the hard glass?  
The windows were shut.

We sat with our eyes down and learnt the sentence of stasis—  
As though the querulous

Questions of life had always to be excised.  
Each day – the chalk screech

Of our teacher's voices and the dry sussuration of leaves  
In the passage outside.

Yet, in spite of my education, at 16 I started to write. I fell in love with the power of language. I cannot account for it. I read whatever poetry I could get hold of: William Blake, Walt Whitman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wilfred Owen, D. H. Lawrence. I found battered copies of their work in local junk shops and bought them with an illicit sense of pleasure for a few pence. And, at the same time, I began to write poems. Some of these I even sent to prestigious journals in London attaching a hand-written note monstrously proclaiming their virtues. Needless to say, I never heard a word. Undeterred, I continued scrawling and reading – to the consternation of my parents. As I said at the beginning, it was an addiction.

Looking back now, I can see this early adolescent writing was nothing less than a psychological necessity. Poetry came to me, uninvited, as an internal savior. Without the power of words to shape emergent feeling, I couldn't have gone on living or, if I had, it would have been a spectral life, the pale life of one who had merely complied. Writing poetry was a route into an infinitely larger cosmos; a way of bringing myself into the world and of bringing the world into myself. It was an essential organ of integration. Yet when, at 19, I went to University to study Literature and Philosophy I abruptly stopped writing in this personal and exploratory way.

When one writes creatively the words enter consciousness like shy creatures: moist-eyed, vulnerable, unknown. One has no idea quite where they want to go or what they want to do. They have an urgency clamoring for expression but they have, at the same time, a twitching hesitancy that makes the enterprise hazardous. For, at any moment, they may take fright and scamper, leaving the writer powerless and baffled. When it goes well the uncertain words begin to create a compelling form, a kind of semantic dance, not yet complete but full of promise. This is immensely satisfying. One feels utterly absorbed, in a state of trance. But when it goes badly one can feel desperate, on the edge of despair. Generally, one's mood alternates rapidly between the two extreme states – between high expectation and acute frustration. It

is a precarious activity, the outcome far from certain. Every single word has to be constantly tested inside the emerging linguistic pattern, not only for its meaning, but also for its resonance, accuracy, texture, and musical consistency. The act demands, of course, utter concentration – but, even so, any emerging pattern is, at this early stage, inherently unstable and liable to crash, taking all the intricate parts with it. A poem may be written in ten minutes, but most take hours, days, weeks, months, or even years – and many are simply abandoned. At all points, though, such writing remains an adventure into the unknown, into the not-yet-formulated, into the very possibility of new meaning.

At University I learnt a different kind of writing. I quickly adapted to the conventional format of the academic essay. Here one had a schematic outline and the prose sentences followed obediently down the iron tracks of the preconceived argument. The words did not generate original meaning. I knew what I was going to say in advance of saying it. There had to be a beginning, middle, and an end. And the impersonal sentences had to sound like plausible imitations of the sentences of other critics, particularly those listed in the key bibliographies. In writing academic essays I lost my voice, my own language for discovering my own thought, my own way of connecting my life with the life of literature. For three years, the conventional form of academic writing damned the inner stream which had begun to flow so dramatically.

### *We Put Phrases in Coffins and Buried them Neatly*

After University my old habit of writing returned slowly. But it was no longer exuberant or confident. There was an acerbic critic on my shoulder always watching: “*It was not as good as ... Joyce ... Flaubert ... Lawrence ... Kafka ... It was not as good as ...*” I had internalized a critical expectation that paralyzed any adventurous engagement with language, of letting words loose, of letting them skip and dart. If my early education had only offered a curriculum of dead or desiccated objects, my higher education had offered an inhibiting code of linguistic conduct. It had inserted a censor in my brain which judged adversely any personal writing, even before it had begun to unfold. Before such a vigilant Nobodaddy the unruly children of creativity simply withdrew. It took years to push the puritan censor back and clear an open space for the acrobatic child.

But then my concern for creativity found a new home: teaching. For after I completed my degree, I decided to become an English teacher. Consciously, I was choosing a profession; unconsciously, no doubt, I was taking revenge on my own education. At first – need I confess it? – I erred on the side of freedom, self-expression, and spontaneity. I wanted my students to announce themselves: to write poems, to improvise plays, to forge the language of their own experience. I went in naive and created absurd difficulties for myself. But out of the fray I struggled to develop – often, against the odds – a better sense of how creativity might be guided and grounded.

When, in the second year of teaching, one of my 15-year-old students, Charles Bridgeman, wrote (in class) the following poem, I knew that what I was looking

for – a poetic and creative education – could, in principle, be achieved:

**There was a Time**

There was a time when I  
                                    small boy  
  would jump and run  
through towering grass and groping trees  
                            triumphant in my speed and nerve.

When we  
                            polluted water paddling  
                                    caught fish half drugged  
drowning them in jars.

When we  
                            stackwreckers  
  would race a red bellowing farmer home  
never to be caught.

When we  
                            impossiblewallscaling  
  would race stiff limbed  
to sicken on green fruit.

When we  
                            hiding place sitting  
  one drag passing  
                            would crouch laughing choking  
with unbelieved taletelling that puzzled all.

Then as unseen education tightened its grip  
                            and parents turned to the future  
we were shoved and pushed unknowing  
                            in tight moulds

stifling us for a world  
                            uniformity wanting  
  frowning at  
simple childish joys.

Now is the time when you  
                            child watching  
  play watching

feel a twinge of  
                            good years gone.

The poem emerged out of the vivid memories of the adolescent boy. It came out of felt experience, but it also emerged out of his earnest imitative playing with language. In

fact, it had been triggered by the poems I had presented, especially a poem by the American poet, e e cummings, and the English poet, Roger McGough. The uneven, occasionally brilliant, experimentation with the free line as well as the original compounding of words (the delightful “impossiblewallscaling”), both derived from these innovative poets.

Indeed, it became very clear to me that the poems had provided essential models for the student’s expression. It struck me, forcibly, that what are often presented as anti-theoretical concepts, “self” and “expression” (on one side) with “culture” and “tradition” (on the other) are truly complimentary. Each needs the other. Too much self-expression, isolated from a living tradition, and one ends with autism; too much tradition (isolated from the individual life of engaged feeling) and one ends with cultural sclerosis. I began to conceive the teaching of poetry – and, indeed, of all the arts – as the task of bringing the two conceptions into the most intense conjunction possible. What I was moving towards was an apprenticeship model of artistic learning with a strong existential stamp: a model that could be applied across the arts and that was also a living paradigm of authentic learning.

I could see this model also applied to me as a poet. My first poems came out of my predicament – they were existential to the core – but they also sounded uncannily like Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Yet it was through their voices that I stood a chance of finding my own.

Looking back at my education I can now see it was far too prescriptive. It led to cultural sclerosis. It demanded no existential engagement. Because it lay blankly on the other side of my feeling life, I learnt little and became alienated, both from school and from myself:

We sat with our eyes down and learnt the sentence of stasis.

At University it was a similar experience. We were not brought into vivifying relationship with the writers we studied. *Our* voices were not put alongside *their* voices. We were spectators given a handful of labels to attach to the literary exhibits.

We were dutiful and did our academic work putting our disconnected lives on hold, until we forgot who we were or what we might become.

Yet from the experience of writing poetry and the experience of teaching, I came to see that creativity can lie at the center of the good curriculum and that the arts, above all, have the key to generating an engagement which never tires where, finally, the grammar of schism is met by the grammar of creativity – where words turn into kestrels on the wind’s edge.